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SUBJECT: 24TH FAO AFRICAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS
COMPETITIVENESS, BIOTECHNOLOGY, FIRE, LAND REFORM

1. Summary: The biennial African Regional Conference (ARC) of the UN Agency for Food and Agriculture (FAO), held in Bamako, Mali, from January 30 to February 3 highlighted the continent's lack of progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals for reducing hunger and poverty, and provided an opportunity to identify strategies to correct this. Issues selected for detailed discussion included competitiveness of African agriculture; the African Seeds and Biotechnology Program; biotechnology regulation; fire in the agriculture-forestry interface; land reform; and information dissemination. Reform of FAO and the Independent External Evaluation of FAO also were briefly discussed. End summary.

2. The ARC was attended by representatives of about 40 countries from the region, together with observers from international organizations, NGOs, and from the U.S., France, Italy and the Holy See. Rome-based Alternate Permanent Representative to the UN Agencies, Willem Brakel, represented the USG. The first two days (January 30-31) were dedicated to technical discussions. A meeting of African Union (AU) agriculture ministers took place on February 1, followed by plenary sessions of the ARC on February 2 and 3. Full documentation of the ARC is available at www.fao.org. This cable selectively highlights debates and discussions of particular interest to USG audiences.

OPENING HIGHLIGHTS

3. The ARC plenary opened with a ceremony attended by Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure, government ministers and the diplomatic corps. Toure recalled the crisis that recently affected the Sahel, during which unfavorable climatic conditions were compounded by desert locust outbreaks and caused widespread hunger. He affirmed that the right to food is the first human right that should be guaranteed, and questioned attempts to put conditions on food aid. He had warm words of praise for Director General (DG) Jacques Diouf (who he revealed once held a Malian passport) and expressed support for the latter's efforts to reform FAO.

4. DG Diouf, in his remarks, highlighted Africa's decline in average per capita food production over the past 40 years, and the drop in the continent's share of global agricultural exports. He cited water, rural infrastructure, fertilizer and financing as significant constraints, calling on African governments to honor the commitment made in the Maputo Declaration of July 2003 to allocation at least ten percent of national budgetary resources to agriculture and rural development within five years. Diouf described current activities of FAO designed to complement the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Program (CAADP), adopted by African agriculture ministers in January 2002.

5. The new Independent Chair of the FAO Council, Mohammed Noori (Iran), elected last November, spoke of the scourge of hunger during a time of unprecedented wealth. He pointed to the limitations of the "invisible hand" of markets, and suggested that FAO could be the world's "visible heart" to address the hunger problem. He pledged to work with members to reform FAO so that it could better respond to current needs and realities.

6. The ARC technical sessions were organized as discussions around several key themes, for which the FAO Secretariat had prepared background papers. Highlights

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of the papers and discussions follow.

AGRICULTURAL COMPETITIVENESS

7. FAO's analysis on "Enhancing the Competitiveness of Agriculture and Natural Resources Management under

Globalization and Liberalization to Promote Economic Growth" was the starting point for discussions. The paper called for urgent action to promote water control technologies, raise productivity, improve farmer incentives, promote use of modern agro-processing and farm mechanization, improve business skills, support vertical and horizontal linkages and farmer-market linkages, promote appropriate policy measures, extension services and research.

18. Participants generally concurred with FAO's analysis, but underscored what they considered two key factors: constraints on African farmers' potential to realize economies of scale, and unfair competition in global markets due to developed countries' agricultural subsidies.

19. The U.S. observer delegate expressed support for NEPAD's agricultural agenda, recalling the September 2005 USG announcement pledging \$200,000 for CAADP annually over the next five years. This support, he explained, was in the context of the President's Initiative to End Hunger in Africa, with a focus on increasing agricultural productivity and rural incomes, with emphasis on the poorest and most vulnerable groups. He noted that U.S. official development assistance (ODA) to Africa had increased substantially since 2000, and that the President in 2005 had committed to a doubling of such assistance by 2010. The U.S. representative pointed out that trade and investment had the potential to provide significant resources to the continent, far in excess of ODA -- hence the importance of the Doha Development Round, in which the U.S. had made ambitious proposals to cut tariffs deeply and eliminate all trade-distorting subsidies. He also highlighted significantly increased USG contributions for trade capacity building, and noted the benefits realized from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).

BIOTECHNOLOGY

10. The Secretariat had prepared two papers related to agricultural biotechnology. The first of these outlined a proposal for an African Seeds and Biotechnology Program. The program goal is to increase food security through establishment of effective seed systems with the framework of the Global Plan of Action for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. The AU would implement the program within the NEPAD framework. It would address Africa's present inability to take full advantage of recent advances in seed sector development.

11. The Second FAO paper was on "Policy and Regulation of Biotechnology in Food Production." The first sentence of the Executive Summary captured the document's generally precautionary, reluctant and worried stance towards the technology: "Modern agricultural biotechnology has become a highly controversial issue, which has polarized the civil society in terms of the potential benefits and risks of the adoption of genetic engineering technologies and resulting products in food and agricultural systems." The paper reviewed existing policy and legal instruments, with a decided slant toward approaches that treat biotech products as new, different, and potentially threatening.

12. The two papers were discussed back to back, and the themes raised by delegates tended to blend. Participants generally welcomed the seed initiative, although several called for increasing the emphasis on capacity building. The discussion on utilization and regulation of biotechnology included various reactions:

-- Morocco observed that biotech "offers considerable opportunities" and therefore "should be applied" to help address food needs.

-- Kenya opined that Africa needed to proceed with GMOs "very carefully."

-- Libya stated that GMOs should be used to supplement, and not to replace, conventional germ plasm.

-- Zimbabwe commented that "to play a meaningful role, we [Africans] need to have the capacity to be players in this game;" and "maybe some of the fears expressed about biotech are the result of a lack of national capacity."

-- Nigeria said there needed to be "an indigenous biotechnology" in Africa.

-- Mozambique described GMOs as an inevitable part of globalization that also were an issue in food aid.

-- South Africa said biotech should be viewed as part of a broad range of scientific techniques, not just genetic

modification, while many African countries are still struggling with basic techniques such as tissue culture and marker-assisted breeding. Support for these activities needs to be sustainable. SADC has established a regional advisory committee to inform decision-makers about biotech and biosafety.

-- The observer from the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) said the organization has been working on a study to sample six of twenty member countries, seeing the need to consult broadly with stakeholders before there could be a harmonized position on biotech.

-- Two NGO observers took a stridently anti-biotech line, calling for a 10-year moratorium on all biotechnology in Africa and demanding a ban on genetic use restriction ("terminator") technology.

¶13. Responding to participants' comments, the FAO Secretariat's speaker from the African regional office

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proclaimed FAO's neutrality and deference to the policy choices of member states, stating that the organization was there only to assist states in implementation. Significantly, however, this speaker went on to explain how FAO could help a country that might want to ensure that its borders are closed to GMOs. FAO's press release at the opening of the ARC again reinforced the negative aspects, with a sub-heading in bold type asserting that "GMOs remain a source of concern."

¶14. The Report of the ARC Technical Committee summarized the above discussion neutrally as follows: "Participants also stressed the need to have an understanding of the benefits and risks associated with the adoption and use of biotechnology products and called upon public research institutions to be in the forefront of research on biotechnology while ensuring effective public awareness and information sharing."

¶15. Comment: We subsequently learned in Rome that the paper on biotech policy and regulation had been drafted by a consultant hired by the FAO Regional Office in Accra. Experts at Headquarters had seen several drafts and had urged changes that the consultant chose to ignore. There is no formal clearance process in FAO, and the African Regional Office was free to make its own decision on this. From the USG perspective, FAO's high-profile State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA) Report for 2003-4 on "Agricultural Biotechnology: Meeting the Needs of the Poor?" remains the authoritative, scientifically balanced FAO assessment. End comment.

FIRE; LAND REFORM; INFORMATION

¶16. The ARC also discussed FAO papers on "Fire in the Agriculture-Forestry Interface" and on "Agrarian Reform, Land Policies and the MDGs: FAO's Interventions and Lessons Learned During the Past Decade." The latter paper noted that "secure rights to land and greater equity in land access are important for poverty reduction," but that land interventions had received limited recognition in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. The paper will serve as a useful prelude to the upcoming FAO International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD), to be held in Brazil in March 2006. There was also a paper presented on FAO's role as a knowledge organization, and the current and future role of FAO's World Agriculture Information Center (WAICENT) framework.

HIV/AIDS; AVIAN INFLUENZA

¶17. The implications of HIV/AIDS for agriculture and food security, although not a separate agenda item, came up in various contexts, and was highlighted implicitly by the conspicuous red ribbons worn by Malian President Toure and many senior officials during the opening ceremony. (HIV/AIDS had been notably under-emphasized during the 2004 ARC in Johannesburg; this deficiency was somewhat rectified in the current ARC.)

¶18. Several delegates expressed concern about Avian Influenza and asked about assistance from FAO. The Secretariat replied that FAO was involved in

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demonstration and capacity building activities, but that FAO was not a financial agency for government-implemented actions. (This discussion occurred a week before it was publicly announced that the highly pathogenic H5N1 variant of the virus had been detected in Nigeria.)

FAO REFORM; INDEPENDENT EVALUATION; ARREARS

119. During the plenary session there was little time available for discussion of FAO institutional questions. The Secretariat had prepared a paper the Director General's revised proposals for FAO reform, but participants did not have a significant opportunity to study the document beforehand or to discuss it. The Independent Chair of the Council reported on his recent consultations in Rome. He highlighted the Independent External Evaluation (IEE) of FAO, and the importance for broad participation in the voluntary funding of the IEE. He also spotlighted the issue of members' arrears to FAO -- a problem that he noted complicated the organization's financial situation and could serve as a pretext for others to scale back their contributions.

120. Kenya offered to host the ARC in 2008.

COMMENT

121. FAO's African Regional Conference provided a useful forum for discussions of agricultural development in the continent. At times, however, what was left unsaid in the formal sessions was as important as what was made explicit. In the discussion on biotechnology, for instance, it was evident that delegations were taking a cautious stance in public, while in a number of their own countries research on biotech crops has already advanced considerably. To cite another example, after the USG statement highlighting the importance of trade and investment, several delegates came up to the U.S. rep to thank us for our comments, wishing that others had made the same point. USG support for NEPAD and CAADP also was quietly acknowledged and appreciated by some delegates in the corridors.

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